

## THREE

## Excavating "Globalization" from Street Level

### Homeless Men Recycle Their Past

*Teresa Gowan*

A San Francisco paramedic is eating with his firefighter colleagues in the fire station kitchen. He complains of yet another call to haul a collapsed wino covered in vomit out of the gutter. "I should have slipped him something." Eyes shift uneasily. Some of the firefighters chuckle, others pretend not to hear.

I tell this anecdote to one of the homeless recyclers, Anthony. He laughs. "Put us out of our misery, I guess. Didn't I tell you we rank down somewhere with the stray cats? . . . That kind of attitude, that's the whole point with recycling. When I'm working hard right before their eyes no one can say I'm just a smelly drain on the public purse."

Studies of homelessness do not dwell particularly on smelliness, yet sickness and inadequacy take center stage, resulting in a literature that neglects to analyze independent income-generation. Anthony and many of his colleagues take their work very seriously, and I decided that work, rather than disability, should be my starting point.

The material in this chapter is the product of several episodes of ethnographic research with some twenty-five homeless recyclers living and working in various San Francisco neighborhoods. Following my decision to prioritize work, I approached the recyclers in the street, or in the recycling company yards, rather than through the service agencies catering to the homeless. Using a combination of participant observation and informal interviewing, I got to know the

men by working with them and spending leisure time together, as well as through recorded interviews.

Over time we climbed into dumpsters together, shared beer under the freeways, and met up for occasional fry-ups in my kitchen. They brought me pans, sweaters, and jewelry from dumpsters and acted as my protectors in dodgy situations. I helped with welfare and disability claims, giving them breakfast or a place to shower or visiting them in jail.

In this fieldwork I focused primarily on those who were the most serious about their work, the most productive. And the interest was often mutual. Approaching men as recyclers, and explicitly starting with a curiosity about recycling as work, I find that my work appeals most to those men whose life-worlds support my thesis. Men who are investing recycling with a great deal of meaning, using scavenging to practice a specifically worker identity, respond instantly and enthusiastically to my inquiries about the recycling life. Certainly some of the sample group, including Sam and Clarence, are champion recyclers, carrying some of the biggest loads in the city.

I initially framed the homeless recyclers as survivors, making a place for themselves in a growing third-world-style informal economy. Yet the work of homeless recyclers makes little sense outside the context of their general isolation and rejection by the broader society. As Anthony's comment suggests, the recyclers tend to interpret their work as an escape from stigma. But they do not escape, really. They are still homeless, mostly addicts and alcoholics, and few observers appreciate their efforts.

The "they are workers too" angle, while providing legitimate positive images, came to feel blinkered. One limitation of doing ethnography with the marginalized is that it is hard to see the mechanisms of exclusion. You can study the agencies trying to mop up the problem, but you, like your subjects, are cut off from the larger social turns—institutional, economic, political—that provide the context (although not necessarily the proximal cause) of their miseries. In Castells's terms, people like the recyclers are stuck in a stripped, decaying "space of places," unable to hook into the "space of flows" of the information age.

In this paper, the instrument I use to hook into the big picture is nostalgia, the nostalgia of the dispossessed for the lives they have lost. In each case, individual regrets and losses connect to the large-

scale social shifts set off by what we call "globalization." Unlike many homeless Americans, Sam, Clarence, and Desmond have not always been marginalized and destitute, and their attempts to maintain self-respect through "honest labor" reflect value systems learned in more prosperous times. They are the subjects of this chapter because their nostalgia for the past helps us to explore globalization as loss, not because they are more moral, or more "deserving" than other poor Americans.

"Are you a twenty-first-century man?" asks a *Details* magazine quiz, inviting its hipster targets to "see if you're headed for the dustbin of history or the fast track to the future." High scorers are praised for their adaptability:

Congratulations. You're wary of any and all organizations, you rely on no group, government, or organized religion. . . . you let expedience guide your lifestyle choices, you are able to think on your feet and sanguinely shift jobs, friends, lovers, and residences at the drop of a virtual hat. In other words, you're ready for the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>

*Details* puts a positive spin on the nineties economy, encouraging its young male readers to embrace flexibility over predictable career paths, opportunity over job security. The tone may be ironic, but only with that Generation X kind of superficial ironic gloss, which lacks a critical referent under its raised eyebrows and knowledgeable smirk. The message prevails. Safety is for sadsack losers, but you, dear reader, are smart, independent, healthy, suave, entrepreneurial enough to play to win. You're *money*, baby.

The *Details* reader knows he has to stay lean and hungry, always with an eye to better opportunities, new niches. Jobs-for-life are gone, but the new economy offers quick bucks and stellar careers for the best and the brightest. Like the man with no name, the entrepreneurial individualist can come into his own, proving his courage and self-reliance in the Wild West of flexible capitalism.

Much of this is boyish escapism. The kinds of entrepreneurs profiled in the magazine are hardly the unattached warriors celebrated in the quiz, what with their telltale signs of vital contacts made at top-tier colleges, of helpful investments from family members. It is a different kind of risk if you can return to managing Mom's apartment buildings when things are not working out.

Can twenty-first-century man be found among more marginalized Americans? The writers at *Details* are unlikely to conceive of their supremely adaptive flexible being as a sex worker, migrant farm laborer, or prep cook, let alone a homeless crack addict, panhandler, or thief, yet the insecurity,

mobility, flux, and fragmentation of *Details*' "twenty-first century" is far truer for the poor than for college-educated professionals. Broadly speaking, the lower you go down the economic scale, the less stability you find, and there is nowhere in America where the basic conditions of everyday life are more volatile than on skid row. In the public soap opera played out endlessly in skid row streets across the country, only continued poverty and disappointment can be relied on. Devastating stabs of ill-luck become mundane, and for those without shelter the knocks seem to follow faster and harder. Any time, almost any place, such naked lives lie open to predators biological, criminal, voyeuristic, bureaucratic. Pneumonia, arrest, AIDS, robbery, or the official confiscation of those personal effects carefully nursed through the wilderness, maybe even murder: any or all become possible, even likely, for a person reduced to the status of homeless derelict.

Indeed some homeless men respond to the unstable conditions of life on the street with a remarkable flexibility. The bastard brothers of the entrepreneurial techno-yuppies targeted by *Details*, such twenty-first-century (nineteenth-century? third-world?) have-nots adopt a "hustler" mode of homeless life.<sup>2</sup> They improvise their daily needs through combinations of panhandling, plasma sales, selling the *Street Sheet* newspaper, dumpster-diving for things to sell on the sidewalk, prostitution, using soup kitchens and other charity organizations, petty theft, recycling, selling personal possessions, and small-time drug dealing.

The "Hustler as twenty-first-century man" fits the perspective on homeless workers developed by David Snow and his collaborators.<sup>3</sup> They describe the money-making strategies of the homeless as a set of improvisations for survival, a constant ad-libbing for daily needs. And much of what they have to say about the unpredictability and constant crisis of homeless life rings true in the lives of the men featured in this chapter.

Yet man rarely lives on junk and booze alone. The stigma, assaults, and casual insults of street life knock away most external referents for self-respect, making the project to *be someone* more crucial than ever. But what kind of *someone* feels like the real you? That depends in the main on who you already are, on who you have been before.

The homeless recyclers featured here—the "pros"—are most reluctant to see themselves as playing the system. Instead, they stride across the city, working hard and fast. Usually following established routes and stopping places, they sort their findings into great bags of bottles and cans tied on to their shopping carts, heaving up to two hundred pounds to the recycling companies each run. The most strenuous toilers treat themselves as beasts of burden, harnessing themselves to pull two large carts at once. For others it is more important to use their work to reconnect socially with the non-homeless, or to assert their claims to public space as legitimate trash work-

ers. But what the pros hold in common is the resolve to turn their backs on the painful boredom of skid row life, as they try with all their strength to create lives that are still "decent" in their own eyes.

For these men have not always been poor. In comparison with homeless street vendors or drug dealers, who tend to share much more uniformly marginal and impoverished life histories, many of the pro recyclers have suffered massive drops in income and status. In earlier lives they were long-distance truckdrivers, dockers, mechanics, career soldiers, industry electricians, welders, and delivery drivers. Many of them had union jobs, and most of those who did not were still entitled to health benefits and some degree of job security.

Those earlier lives are gone, dissolved in a compound of poisons equal parts unique and commonplace. Within the current social context of exclusion and intolerance, misfortunes or wrong turnings surmountable in kinder times now serve as life sentences. The inexorable decline of the recyclers' "prospects" since the 1970s has reacted and multiplied with joblessness, family tragedies and unravelings, despair, hallucinations, myopias born of substance love, self-disgust, or incarceration. Connections to institutions that could save them from this dramatic social fall have corroded and crumbled, leaving them to scramble for day-to-day survival.

Yet while the lives of the pros are inescapably overshadowed by their immediate needs, they do their best to minimize their time spent in hustler mode. Instead they play down their desperation in favor of the peculiar comforts of routinized hard labor. Recycling, as their major means of subsistence, becomes not only an essential economic floor, the bare bones of survival, but a broad project to recover and celebrate the routines, productivity, skill, and solidarity of blue-collar work.

The efforts of the recyclers to carve out normality from stigma and to create routine from the anomie of unemployment is by no means reflected in the main body of the academic literature on homelessness. The vast social welfare machine dominates the field, converging on the failures, sickness, or cultural incompetence of the homeless individual. This perspective therefore "brackets" the broader social context of the vast increase in homelessness since the mid-seventies. Large-scale authoritative research projects on poverty are usually seduced into such methodological individualism by the government agencies that can provide their bread and butter.

One advantage of cheap, small-scale qualitative research is that one does not need to work within these limitations. Therefore, instead of using my spotlight on these homeless men to test the dominant theories on homelessness on their own grounds, I use it to illuminate their relationships with the bigger picture, the picture of changing America, the world outside the brackets. The idea is to dig up local traces of the huge shakeup we call "globalization," experienced in the United States as a systemic turn away from the

Keynesian social contract among government, corporations, and unions of the postwar years toward the contemporary period of deregulation, welfare-state dismantling, and union busting.

If we take globalization to mean the transformations of locales by processes instigated or maintained from outside national borders, the United States has been at the center of various forms of globalization for hundreds of years, as both a site and an agent of raw collisions among Europe, America, and Africa. Today, in the richest and most powerful nation on earth, this new "globalization" does not represent a new shattering of the integrity of the local; our "locals" were already globally connected, expansive, reflexive. What Americans *are* experiencing is instead a gradual replacement of the previous military, Keynesian form of globalization with a fresh neoliberal coalition, one representing changed forms of capital, different sensibilities, new winners, and new losers, as well as a resurgence of traditional "conservative" discourse.

Conservative theory defines men like the recyclers, able-bodied single men, as high-functioning deviants in rebellion against the market. The solution, say the rhetoricians of market freedom, is to force the dependent poor to adapt to the current economic structure by removing the safety nets that guarantee their subsistence. Severe penalties for crime will ensure that these newly stimulated energies toward subsistence will be channeled to legitimate activities. Only then will such men be forced by their need for subsistence to learn new skills, or to take jobs at wage and status levels they might previously have found demeaning.

Conservative policies have been put into practice at all levels of government over the last ten years. Financial entitlements have been transformed and safety nets removed, culminating with the 1996 abolition of the sixty-two-year old AFDC program, and the devolution of responsibility for the unemployed to the local level. States are sanctioned with the withdrawal of federal support if they do not institute lifetime welfare limits.

Local governments increasingly require work in exchange for the bare subsistence allowed to prisoners and welfare recipients. The number of welfare recipients in compulsory work programs is expected to reach one million within the next few months.<sup>4</sup> As of June 1997 there were nearly 3,000 "workfare" workers cleaning San Francisco's streets, buses, parks, and housing projects for roughly one tenth of the pay of regular city employees. The new welfare laws could add up to 25,000 more workfare workers within the next two years.<sup>5</sup>

Entitlements to freedom of movement have also been withdrawn. While a million and a half men and women swell the penal colonies, the space outside is more subtly restricted. All over the United States public space is being redefined both formally and informally as private space with selective access for people who do not look poor. New downtown developments use anti-

homeless architecture that closes off "public" space to pedestrian access.<sup>6</sup> In the same commercial strips where consumers are encouraged to browse and linger, homeless people are moved on, cited, and arrested for "encampment" or "obstructing freedom of movement." "Quality of life" offenses not enforced since the depression have been reactivated all over America, making many basic human functions (sleeping, urinating, and so on) illegal to those outside.<sup>7</sup>

The San Francisco version of "quality of life" enforcement was initiated by the "Matrix" program under Mayor Frank Jordan's administration, starting in August of 1993. Under Matrix, homeless people received ten to fifteen thousand citations a year for offenses such as "encampment," "drinking in public," "aggressive panhandling," "urinating in public," or "obstructing freedom of movement." While Matrix's status as an official high-profile political campaign was officially terminated in 1996, the ticketing policy has persisted. The fine for the average citation is \$76, rising to about \$180 and an arrest warrant if left unpaid. Most homeless people are unable to pay these fines, leaving thousands of them with outstanding warrants.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE NOSTALGIA OF THE DISPOSSESSED

There are so many mediating institutions, biographical particularities, and quirks of fate lying between the forces of "globalization" or "neoliberalism" and any one individual. It is hard to justify a simple causal line from structural sea-change to individual disaster. Yet across the industrialized world there are striking correlations among increased corporate mobility across national borders, conservative political ascendancy, and the return of mass indigence, both on and off the streets. The conceptual and political difficulties involved in actually *proving* some causal relationship between the huge and the personal should not foreclose its exploration. Otherwise we have nothing to work with but the decontextualized, sometimes degrading, personal details revealed by the disease model of the social welfare institutions.

The tool of exploration I use here is the concept of nostalgia. Kathleen Stewart defines nostalgia as the attempt to place oneself in time and place, creating "an interpretive space" in reaction to the alienation of postmodern life.<sup>9</sup> She draws a distinction between two different forms of nostalgia within "late capitalism."

... it depends on where you stand: from one place in the cultural landscape nostalgia is a schizophrenic exhilaration of a pure present that reads images for their own sake; from another place it is a pained, watchful desire to frame the cultural present in relation to an "other" world—to make of the present a cultural object that can be seen, appropriated, refused, disrupted or "made something of."

Stewart defines the first kind of nostalgia as the act of taking possession: "Here, individual life narratives dramatize acts of separation (freedom, choice, creativity, imagination, the power to model and plan and act on life)."<sup>10</sup> In such a way the disappearing blue-collar lifestyle mourned by many homeless recyclers is appropriated as kitsch in front of their eyes by pseudo-Bohemian multimedia programmers wearing vintage work shirts with "Johnny" or "Ray" sewn on the chest.

In contrast to this first nostalgia with its power to choose, to freely appropriate, Stewart presents her "other" nostalgia, which might be called the nostalgia of the dispossessed. The "others," who live away from the highways of power and self-determination, experience nostalgia as a "painful homesickness," which aims at "the redemption of expressive images and speech." Those deprived of former certainties and thrown into chaos and loss use nostalgia as a way of placing themselves *inside* a surrounding world which makes sense.<sup>11</sup>

As a collective attempt to reclaim a past world, nostalgia can sharply point up the places where a person's life-turns most clearly knit into a bigger fabric of experiences common to others in similar social locations. For each of the recyclers, the past is a primary referent. Although their pictures of the past are both similar and different, they all see the present in relation to how things "used to be." Each of them makes a life on the street where he can make use of skills, habits, and ways of thinking learned under quite different conditions. In this they are no different from most of us. What is less commonplace about the recyclers is the massive changes in their social standing between then and now. Stigma and extreme downward mobility make them favor the past with the intensity of dying men.

Stewart's "nostalgia of the dispossessed" describes how I understand the attempts of the homeless recyclers to recreate familiar worlds out of the disorientation and degradation of life on the street. They assert values and life-ways drawn from the past as both critique and shield against the alien landscape of the new, that landscape we attempt to contain and describe with the encompassing hot signifier, "globalization."

For the pros, the current version of globalization feels different from the Pax Americana of their past. This version has no place for them, and consequently appears as a collection of alien forces. Experiences of globalization are all about subject position. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on three of the pros, Sam, Clarence, and Desmond, taken from a broader fieldwork sample of twenty-five. They are not composites, but discrete individuals who happen to share certain histories, sensibilities, and strategies with others of the group.

As they mourn and try to keep alive the worlds of their earlier lives, the particular nostalgias of each man point up particular elements of the shift

from Keynesianism to the neoliberal new world order. The homeless ex-manual worker Sam has been marked for life by deindustrialization and the decline in secure employment. The homeless veteran Clarence has witnessed the doors closing on the giant work-creation program provided by the postwar military. And the homeless ex-convict Desmond laments the civil war on the African American working class represented by the War on Drugs.

#### WORK WILL SET YOU FREE: SAM

Sam is a muscular, taciturn Polish American in his early fifties. He spent his youth working on his own hot-rods and playing a lot of football, and he married straight out of high school. He never saw the need for schooling, he says, being confident in his mechanical abilities. Sam became a highly skilled mechanic, holding down a couple of long-term union jobs repairing trucks and industrial machines before he became unemployed, and then homeless.

Sam's knees ache from old sports injuries, but he works continually, putting in two heavy shifts every day and rarely stopping to rest. Keeping his cart on the road he steams along, head down and leaning hard into the weight of the recycling. As he picks up bottles and cans he keeps his eyes on his work, fast sorting each piece into the proper category. One of the less vigorous recyclers who shares Sam's turf calls him "Robocan."

For Sam, it is very important to have his recycling already sorted, because he does not really like to spend much time at the recycling plants. Being around homeless people who are less obsessively workaholic than he is really bothers him. He assumes laziness in other recyclers on the basis of any public rest-taking or excessive talking. Black recyclers are particularly suspect. "I just don't want any of that bullshit," he told me after a black recycler I know had tried to initiate conversation with the two of us. "I'm not interested in shooting the shit. I don't come here for fun. This is work." Sam himself never takes a break anywhere in clear public view.

When Sam hit forty he was still living with his second wife in his own house in Pittsburg, a working-class town in the East Bay. He has hinted on occasion that his second marriage ended "badly," saying that he does not blame his wife for kicking him out. "She couldn't believe what she married. Nor could I." He has four children and two grandchildren, but he does not see any of them except when there is a marriage or death in the family.

Sam explains the deterioration of his second marriage as a result of unemployment and subsequent heavy drinking. (This is not unusual. The divorce rate is around 50 percent higher than the national average in families where the father has lost a job and cannot quickly find an equivalent one.<sup>12</sup>) First Sam was laid off from well-paid union work repairing engines

for a utility company in 1985. He had been working on the same vehicles for years, and knew them inside out. But engines changed, and he could not get motivated to learn the new technology. "Hit me hard, being on the scrap heap, I'll admit that. . . . You don't much consider about unemployment, you know, till it happens to you. Then it's too late to get your bearings." Electronic tinkering with new models "controlled by a stupid piece of plastic" offended his deep love of "real" cars, to which he had dedicated both work and leisure hours since he was a teenager.

Sam found it very hard to deal with his declining position in the labor market. His last job was with a nonunion corporation specializing in brake repair, where he never actually got to work on cars, but instead had to follow a monotonous and rigidly enforced routine. Even though the pay was lower than ten years before, Sam started spending half his income on cocaine. "My heart wasn't with my job anymore, and the manager was always pushing me. He gave us no respect. . . . So I got to putting half my paycheck up my nose. No woman to check up on me." [Sam winks.] "I was generally demoralized, you know. Everything had gone to shit."

When homeless recyclers like Sam express disbelief at their decreasing abilities to command either decent wages or respectful treatment in the years before they became homeless, they are pointing to a phenomenon bigger than their own personal shifts in social location. Call it what you will—a "space of flows," disorganized capitalism, the condition of postmodernity, or late capitalism<sup>13</sup>—there are several ways in which the Bay Area economy of the nineties manifests qualitative breaks with the situation twenty years ago.

On the national level, large-scale, collective, wage-bargaining structures have disappeared. Monopolies have broken out of state regulation almost entirely, and manufacturing jobs have either gone elsewhere or been transformed into minimum-wage, temporary work—work designed for women, immigrants, and young men who do not have the memories of better conditions that might make them mutinous.

California suffered the effects of this restructuring later than the older manufacturing regions of the United States. The state was insulated from the manufacturing collapse of the early 1980s by its disproportionate share of defense contracts, its large share of computer and bio-tech companies, and a real-estate frenzy financed by the Los Angeles-based junk-bond boom.<sup>14</sup>

The early nineties revealed the inability of these industries to sustain general prosperity. Working-class Californians suffered from a prolonged and severe recession, losing 1.5 million jobs in 1990–92, including a quarter of all manufacturing jobs. Construction, always the best bet for unskilled male labor, practically stopped—the rate of housing starts in the early nineties was the lowest since the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> Several white recyclers have

mentioned that journeyman work used to earn them twelve to fourteen dollars an hour. By 1994 it was down to six or seven. In the Bay Area the disjunction between the decimation of heavy-industry work and the booming computer industry added to the problems of blue collar workers by bringing in large numbers of younger people with high disposable incomes who are able to pay increasingly fantastic rents and house prices.

The unemployment crisis for manual workers has contributed to the blossoming of the local informal economy. Unlicensed and tax-avoiding entrepreneurs and their employees flourish, working as under-the-table taxi drivers, carpenters, house cleaners, hair dressers, recyclers, mechanics, dog walkers, electricians, junk vendors, garment-makers, psychics, roofers, manufacturers, nannies, and gardeners.

Rather than providing competition for the more formal enterprises, much informal work actually interlocks with it, increasing the profits to large companies.<sup>16</sup> In the case of San Francisco recycling, the garbage giant Norcal dominates both the legal and the informal economies in trash. Norcal holds the city contract for both garbage collection and curbside recycling. The company also owns the two largest recycling companies in the city, both of which buy the overwhelming majority of their materials from the scavengers of the informal economy.

Sam and other ex-manual workers picking up bottles and cans on the streets of San Francisco are participants in a great slide from secure wage labor in the formal economy to insecure "survival strategies" outside of any protective regulation. But the pros will not accept the idea that recycling represents a reactive, hand-to-mouth existence, a desperate scrabbling at the bottom of the heap. Rather, they all appreciate and take pleasure in their work as a challenging, socially useful activity, which gives structure to their days. In Sam's case, recycling is a vehicle for him to bring his old mechanic persona alive again, competent and industrious. But in order to convince himself with this act of will he needs to continuously distance himself from the apparition of the lazy scam artist.

Sam and most of the other white pros are quite explicit about differentiating themselves from less hard-working homeless people. They often discuss the hopeless dependence, laziness, and irredeemable "snakishness" of other poor men, men who are not "workers" in their eyes. Sometimes they have good reasons for suspicion. Sniping across the timeworn frontier between the deserving and the undeserving poor, they effortlessly slip into a repertoire of contempt instilled in more prosperous former lives.

Their contempt is racialized: poor African Americans are the most common targets. However, most of the white recyclers make a point of expressing respect and collegiality toward the black recyclers, as long as they are fiercely gung-ho about their work. Derick, a thirty-something African American veteran, credits Sam with getting him going as a successful recy-

cler. "You wouldn't know it, but he's tight, Sam. There was a time I was really losing it, but he persuaded me recycling could make me some decent money. [He] . . . gave me a bunch of good tips."

Sam marches the streets to escape the ghost of himself as an undeserving pauper. Other pro recyclers conjure up more positive, even evangelical, understandings of their vigorous work ethic. David, another white recycler with a much more countercultural history than Sam, talks passionately of how the moment-to-moment sense of purpose, the rhythmic physical effort of it all, keeps him human.

I don't know about other people but if I wasn't able to recycle, I'd lose hope. I'd lose hope for being able to put one foot in front of the other. A lot of times it's a challenge. Takes determination. . . . I'm not doing so well, I push harder. It's like it accelerates you. . . . Some days I get to feel like the old Dave. . . . I mean, I just get on with my work, no fuss, just like other guys.

While the physical work itself is usually solitary, the cultural work of the pro recyclers can become a collective project. Many of the men naturally talk about their work lives in terms of "we," especially when appealing to the social usefulness of recycling vis-à-vis other occupations of the homeless. Taking time out under the freeway one day, Anthony, Bill, and Javier discussed the superior morality of the recycling life:

*Anthony:* We're just trying to be decent, you know. I mean I could be a drug dealer, because I do happen to have a connection. [Laughter.] But recyclers, we want to choose the other road, not preyin' onto people's kids or stealing or something. Just cleaning up the neighborhood.

*Javier:* But people disses us anyway. No respect. You're a bum, you're scum.

*Bill:* Not everyone disses us. OK, those ignorant mother-fuckers don't see it, but at least we know, and people with eyes know how we're doing a good job out here, the recyclers. The best we *can* seeing as things are this fucking rough. Well, most of us anyway.

*Anthony:* Except Javier. [He shoves Javier affectionately.]

*Bill:* You tore into those bags like a pack of coyotes, man. Definitely letting down the profession. . . .

*Javier:* Never knew I was a professional. Well whaddaya know. I finally made it! [General amusement.]

#### SERGEANT TO SCAVENGER: CLARENCE

As he tells it, Clarence was a mama's boy. Raised "strict" in a Baptist family in a tract home in South Central Los Angeles, he was rarely in trouble and spent most of his free time playing sports. But he was not altogether a happy child.

His fear of his father, a man who combined substantial drinking with hellfire sermonizing and righteous whippings, led him to escape the neighborhood as soon as he could. Leaving his family for good, he joined the army right out of high school and did pretty well. Not seeing himself as the macho type, he gravitated toward "wheelin' and dealin'" from his post as a supplies clerk. In his eight years stationed in Germany he built up several links to the local underground economy. "I bent the rules some, but didn't do no harm—everyone does it," he says. This made him plenty of friends, both on base and off. Clarence really liked Germany and misses his German friends intensely. From where he is now, his years in Germany appear both impossibly far and close to his heart. The details of his life over there, his daily routines, the names of acquaintances, of local bars, shops, and parks, all are extraordinarily fresh in his mind. Like many African Americans, he experienced living in western Europe as a release from the type of racism he had grown up with in Los Angeles. "You never know what's your good time till it's all over. That was my good time, I guess." He sometimes dreams of getting together the airfare, but he knows it would be real different without the army.

Clarence is now 42 and a homeless recycler. He was discharged from the Presidio army base in the late eighties, after failing a second random drug test. In shock, he unsuccessfully floundered for subsistence and housing. All he knew was the army and its ways and means, and he had long lost touch with his family. He considered trying to find his mother. Maybe his father was dead, or perhaps they had separated. In the end, Clarence was so ashamed of his cocaine habit he could not face his mother anyhow. "I mean, I was the *good* son, you know, not the crackhead. Funny thing is, I still am, after all." Not knowing other poor people, it took him six months to find the soup kitchens and to get on General Assistance. During this time he lived only a few minutes walk from his former base, camping on Baker beach and eating out of garbage cans. "I was too depressed to get my shit together, too ashamed to ask for help. But one good thing, I got clean of cocaine, seeing as I had no cash. Didn't last though. . . . Drugs mess you up, but once you're down, it's all you've got."

Most of the day Clarence pushes two large carts around the city, following a recycling routine that he calls his "patrol." Several restaurants save him bottles and boxes. Apart from the obvious benefits of stabilizing income, such connections are important points of pride, ways to convince himself and others that people who are not homeless rely on his services and trust him to keep to a routine. His manner is polite but preoccupied, avoiding casual eye contact. He often has a puzzled, distracted look, as if he cannot remember where he put something.

Clarence has made quite a success out of recycling, winning the respect of both suppliers and peers for the size and quality of his loads. He considers his work socially useful and insists that others realize this:

The company, Norcal, doesn't mind us talking to the public and asking permission to pick up their recycling. They're working toward an environmental consciousness. I believe they want to make sure the trash goes to the right place. We're sorting it out so it doesn't break down an' . . . [make] poisoned contaminous toxic waste in the soil.

To put Clarence's interpretation in context, many other recyclers have extremely antagonistic relationships with the same company, whose workers are sometimes physically violent to homeless recyclers. One manager tried to persuade the Immigration and Naturalization Service to prosecute another of the pros. Yet Clarence himself *has* achieved a cordial relationship with some Norcal staff, even working for them as a security guard on a few occasions. Few "street" homeless people can make themselves acceptable enough for wage labor, but Clarence manages to keep himself supernaturally clean and well laundered, even though he sleeps in the same clothes out on the bare sidewalk every night of the year.

Clarence has a similar approach to his relationship with the welfare bureaucracy. Welfare officials often act as though clients not only have no jobs, but no legitimate lives outside their claimant status. It is therefore easy for them to treat such third-class citizens as though they have nothing better to do than wait in line for seven hours or spend weeks collecting the right forms for entitlement to maintain their bare subsistence. Men and women on GA are publicly shamed by street-sweeping duties, which display their dependent status to the general public. Yet Clarence rejects the more common role of resentful, passive client, thinking of himself more as dutiful taxpayer than stigmatized pauper.

Uniquely among the pros Clarence declares his earnings to the city:

You know, with General Assistance we're allowed to make money, and we mail in our receipts once a month. I'm on this program now. We don't have to sweep the streets and we can do recycling. Actually, we still go to workfare but we're allowed to work part-time. We're allowed to earn up to four hundred bucks—well even more actually. Every one hundred dollars we earn we are minus twenty dollars from our General Assistance . . . but we're in the plus zone for, well, eighty bucks.

I mentioned to another recycler, Walter, that at least one recycler I knew sent in his recycling receipts to GA. He was amazed. "That's not conscientious," he said, "that's just insane." Walter thinks that it is pointless to pursue any legitimate relationship with the city, given that homeless people are not treated like other citizens. "Why kid yourself?" was his take. But Clarence will not participate in his own marginalization any more than he has to. One afternoon Derick was complaining of his treatment in the GA office. Clarence said, "OK, maybe. But you can't give attitude, brother. Act respectful and that's what you get." Derick shook his head, incredulous.



"Respect! Right! You crazy man?" After his characteristic pause for thought, Clarence answered, "Not really. Not yet."

Clarence's story is not unusual. The streets are full of homeless veterans. As the biggest public works program of the postwar years, the military provided millions of jobs for working-class men and women, with job security and decent benefits for veterans. For many African American and Latino men, it opened a much-needed door into middle-class America. But warfare is being transformed into a high-tech, highly mechanized affair, and the mass-employment model is being gradually shed, removing the most reliable employment and training option for the young men of low-income communities.

The changes mirror the shift in the rest of the American economy toward a dual economy composed of well-paid symbolic analysts on the one hand and a mass of low-paid and insecure service and assembly workers on the other. A core of elite military officers and technicians land well-paid and stable employment, while millions of enlisted men and women clean floors and stand guard at minimum-wage level. Basic military pay is \$199 per week before taxes, and unit commanders frequently use "Article 15" punishments to further dock the soldiers' pay for minor infractions. One in three recruits drops out before completing his or her first term of enlistment.<sup>17</sup>

The restructuring of the military is a substantial area of deindustrialization. Like the Fortune 500 companies, the post-Cold War military has used drug testing to push through large-scale redundancies. Started by the Navy in 1981, a heavy regime of compulsory random testing spread to other branches of the military, under the title of "surprise and deterrence." By the end of the eighties the Pentagon was claiming to have reduced illegal drug use by two-thirds, leaving Clarence and many like him dishonorably discharged.<sup>18</sup>

Making the best of his bleak chances as an unskilled forty-something African American, Clarence turns a brave face to the world, usually acting as if sleeping on the sidewalk and pushing around four hundred pounds of bottles is just fine with him. He tries to have faith that others will see him as the upright, hard-working man he is. Yet sometimes he gives signs of what might lie underneath this upbeat facade. Once I asked him why he slept out on the sidewalk beside a garment factory rather than finding a hiding place like most of the others. "I've got nothing to hide," he answered. "There's no need." As Clarence tends to keep some cash on him, I asked him, "But couldn't you get jumped for your cash?" He shook his head and paused. He screwed up his eyes, sighing. "Look, you can't be givin' them a reason, any reason." He changed the subject quickly. What he meant, I later understood, was that he didn't want to give other "decent" folk, let alone the

police, any reason to classify him as a furtive criminal. He is no smalltime dealer with a stash of rocks, no petty thief concealing his spoils, only an honest worker of the underworld, with nothing to hide but his pain.

Clarence is not the deluded fool that Walter thinks he is. He knows that his status as a homeless black crack-user is the archetype of the violent criminal in mainstream popular culture. His response to this dilemma is to create a transparent, strenuously legitimate life, which leaves no room for suspicion.

In his struggle for respectability Clarence does his best to have the same kinds of relationships with his suppliers, with the church, even with government that he would choose to have if he were not homeless. This is an incredibly difficult task. For example, Clarence tried at one point to join a church congregation, attending services for several weeks running. This attempt to join a community of housed people on equal terms went into a spin when two companions from the street insisted on joining him. They slept through most of the service, then ran off with the collection money. "That was just so depressing," he said. "I knew they were up to something, but I couldn't be sure, you know." Not only does Clarence act as if he is not automatically stigmatized as a homeless man, but he also gives his companions the same benefit of the doubt he requests for himself. In his own words, "You know, when you lose trust that's it. You're gone."

Clarence's attempts to be "normal" mark his refusal to participate in the stigmatizing process by pretending he does not see it. Trying hard not to "default" on his "schedule," he converts what most people consider a highly informal hand-to-mouth subsistence practice into a legal, transparent routine. From informalizing the military, he has moved to formalizing the informal economy.

Clarence's project of transparency and connection is quite different from Sam's compulsion to throw himself passionately into his physical labor. Without reducing either man to racial stereotypes, it seems clear that for Clarence dignity is not to be achieved by back-breaking labor, "slaving." Such donkey work is all-too-connected with the legacy of slavery to be a source of self-esteem. James, another African American pro, is equally disparaging of "pure" labor, commenting: "My old man slaved himself to an early death laying tarmac. He wanted something better for me." Most of the African American recyclers underplay the physical effort involved, although many of them work very hard indeed. For them, the pure effort and bodily strength they put into recycling is not the primary honor in the work, not the part that they say makes them feel more human. They are more concerned to see themselves as skilled and knowledgeable, able to make and maintain relationships with their suppliers. Sam, in striking antithesis, draws on the longtime notion of the white Republican worker, for whom vigorous, taciturn work habits form the cornerstone of individual freedom and oppor-



tunity. Slavery and racial identity are touchstones of work identity for whites as much as for African Americans. Sam's embrace of (self-imposed) physical extremes that Clarence and James call slaving is partly about distinguishing himself from the "lazy" African Americans he will not speak to. In similar, self-deceiving ways the white artisans of the pre-Civil War free states attributed their freedom to their ability to independently discipline themselves, while they scorned the supposedly dependent and present-time-oriented slave.<sup>19</sup>

#### LIFE SENTENCE: DESMOND

Desmond is a tall, slender black man in his early fifties. He has a charming, quiet confidence—unlike most of the pros he gives the impression of complete social competence—but his marginal status is marked by his cart and his missing front teeth. He collects his cans in the North Beach area of the city, which is the part most visited by San Francisco's tourist hordes.

After a traumatic early childhood with a violent father, Desmond spent a peaceful protected youth with his older sisters and grandparents. They lived in Newark, New Jersey, where his grandparents both worked in the local hospital, Grandma in the laundry, Grandpa delivering supplies to the wards.

They were from the South, real traditional country people. They tried to raise us respectful, but everything was so different outside the house. Newark was jumpin' back then, and I just lost my soul to music. And I don't mean gospel music! . . . By fourteen years old, I'd say, I knew that was what I was gonna do, not waste my life in servitude like the old folks. That's what I was thinking.

Desmond started to work as an informal roadie at clubs a couple of evenings a week, checking out soul bands. He traded his mother's fur-trimmed coat for his first electric guitar and amplifier. His grandma was not pleased, but let him have his way as long as he stayed in school.

Then I met Jimmy, my best buddy. He played bass for Sam McGee. . . . Sam was *big* on the East Coast back then. Jimmy got me a job as roadie with that outfit. See, he told Sam I was eighteen, but really I'd only just turned sixteen. I wasn't even shaving yet, but yes Ma'am, I just left Mama Betty and the girls and took off with those dudes. . . . Grandpa was already passed from his stroke, you see.

Over the next fifteen years Desmond gradually worked himself up from roadie to bass to rhythm guitar with McGee. On tour in Washington, D.C., he fell in love with a Trinidadian singer, who went on the road with the band. They married and started a family. This was when things started to get difficult financially. Shirley, his wife, made some money doing nails, but the take-home pay from the aging band was not getting any better. Touring with

a kid was crazy, they decided. Desmond tried in vain to find a slot in a local cover band, which was making decent money. After their second child was born in 1983, Desmond quit the band and tried to get some "regular" work. A few weeks surveying the wreckage of the Newark economy moved them to drive out to Los Angeles, where Desmond's sister had settled. The situation there looked more promising, but months of pounding the pavement failed to turn up a job with "prospects" of any kind.

See, I never knew it would be so hard. All that time I was with the band, I used to think how everything would be easier with the family if I just gave up playing out for a while, put in my time doing some honest labor. . . . [Laughs.] Guess I wasn't reading the papers. I would have been more responsible if I had only got to build up seniority somewhere, but I wanted to follow my dream. I should say our dream in fact.

Later, Desmond qualified his regrets, saying, "See, I coulda been responsible and still got screwed. Seniority is a long shot too, these days. I don't see too many of us out there." He meant black men working in the trades. Desmond insists that the dismal labor market pushed him into drug dealing.

I couldn't find *anything*, only jobs for kids. So after a few months starving my babies and losing my self-respect at Taco Hell I quit. . . . Then I started dealing bud [marijuana] instead. In fact, not instead exactly—I kept a part-time day gig at another fast-food joint, dealt out the back door, just like everyone else.

Marijuana got more and more expensive during the eighties, due to a heavy crackdown on the growers upstate. Crack cocaine, on the other hand, became far cheaper and more easily available. Like a couple of other men in the sample, Desmond slipped from marijuana into dealing crack cocaine without really thinking about the difference between the drugs.

It was around 1987. I was still into reefer myself, but crack was where to make the easy money. That's what the people want now. Back in the seventies we wanted to be mellow, now it's "Beam me up, Scotty," "Make me crazy." Now maybe if I'd had a decent-sized place I would have grown it [the reefer] myself, but that wasn't an option with four people in a one-bedroom.

In 1989 Desmond was caught sitting in his car with over six grams of crack in his inside pocket. Unfortunately for him and thousands of other black Californians, the federal mandatory sentencing laws which had come into effect the previous year required that he serve at least five years in prison. This was a first drug offense and Desmond was a minor street dealer, yet ironically this relative "innocence" left him vulnerable, with no bargaining chips. Dealers with more connections, more information, can usually reduce their sentences in exchange for naming some names.<sup>20</sup>

Desmond had rarely been in trouble, his worst previous encounter with

the law being a drunk-driving offense several years before. Now he was ripped from his family, leaving them destitute. Once inside, he suffered the panic, humiliation, and despair common to first-time prisoners. He did not know how to fight:

See, I grew up with womenfolk, and then, well, the music world, there's a bunch of mellow dudes. . . . You don't want to know the shit I went through in there. Losing my teeth, *that* wasn't the worst of it. . . . I got myself through by reading and watching too much TV. . . . Staying out of certain people's way, trying not to rattle this or that psycho's chain, that's a full-time occupation.

It is easy to be a felon if you are a working-class black man. While the military has cut back on its role as mass employer for unskilled working-class men and women, the rising prison industry has taken up many of them. In California the number of prisoners has tripled since 1980, while nationally 7.9 percent of the black population was either locked up or under supervision by 1990, compared with 1.7 percent of the white population.<sup>21</sup>

Taken together with the downsizing of the military, the vast expansion of the incarceration industry since the end of the Cold War is emblematic of certain changes in the priorities of American government. The gradual erosion of the mass military and growth of a mass system of penal colonies has been particularly significant for working-class black men. African Americans have been disproportionately represented in the lower ranks of the armed forces since the Second World War, and have at the same time been disproportionately hit by deindustrialization in the civilian economy. They now account for over 90 percent of prisoners convicted of crack cocaine dealing, and the majority of homeless men in most large American cities.<sup>22</sup>

Drug possession and trafficking convictions are the engine of the incarceration boom. In the years 1986 to 1991 the African Americans doing time for drug offenses in state prisons increased by 465.5 percent.<sup>23</sup> This law enforcement emphasis on the predominantly black and Latino crack cocaine trade is a relatively recent development. Until 1982 heroin was the primary target of Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and local police antidrug activity. Around that time the mass consumption of powder cocaine mushroomed, primarily among the middle and upper-middle classes. The economic structure of these sectors was quite hierarchical, and therefore relatively stable. The popularity of crack cocaine, taking off in the mid-eighties, "flattened" the structure of the drug trade. Anyone with cooking equipment and baking powder could convert powder cocaine into rocks and join the competition. The ensuing turf-wars became more and more violent, justifying increasing police focus on this new, more horizontal industry. It seems that as the crack trade has consolidated, the crack-related homicide rate has declined. The decline may, however, be too late

to change public opinion. Media perceptions of the problem were manipulated by the Reagan administration and the DEA, until most journalists, and therefore most Americans, accepted as common sense the idea that street crack dealers were the primary agents of the decline of the quality of life in the inner cities.<sup>24</sup>

Desmond's experience would suggest a more complex relationship between devastated inner city neighborhoods and the crack trade. For him dealing was a last resort rather than a longtime project. He says that he certainly had no ambition to rise in the business, only hoping to find something else and get out. That is why he was halfheartedly working a street corner at the age of forty. "It's ironical how, well, I wasn't really suited to dealing. Not at all. For a start, I'm too softhearted. Some poor fiend come beg me for credit I found it hard to resist. Especially women. I'm a family man."

The mandatory sentencing required by the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act slammed down on Desmond and his companions in the vast pool of "clockers" (street dealers), most of them African American and Latino men. Drug arrests and convictions soared. Squeezed into dealing for subsistence by tight labor markets, long-term poverty, racial segregation, and incremental welfare destruction, thousands of nonviolent poor men and women were pulled into the jaws of the expanding penal-industrial complex.

When she realized how long Desmond's sentence was, Shirley took the girls back to Trinidad, promising to come back when he was released. According to Desmond, his wife's mother, an evangelical Christian, was horrified by his offense, and put pressure on Shirley to divorce him during his fourth year in prison. He has never seen any of them since. On release, Desmond was paroled to San Francisco, where he hoped to make a fresh start in a place where no one knew him as a dealer. He did not contact his sister, hoping to surprise her with good news later on. "Donna was good to Shirley, but shamed of my fooling. I never could get her to visit me in the joint," he said.

Good news never reached Donna. Desmond's spirits were not high leaving prison, and he easily sank in the Tenderloin district's sea of indigent ex-cons. Work seemed harder than ever to find, as he had no friends among the working population. It was at this point, staying in a welfare hotel with a prison acquaintance, that Desmond developed a crack habit for the first time. "I *knew* what I was getting into. I was thinking, OK, things can't get any worse. May as well get *high* before I die." With no one to turn to, crack quickly exhausted his minimal income and he could no longer afford his share of the room.

Recycling, he says, is the best street life offers. "Less of the bullshit, maybe a fraction more of the respect." Keeping his cart in the mouth of one of three alleyways, Desmond can sit out on one of the main drags, retrieving containers as soon as people discard them. Every fifteen minutes or so, he

makes a small collection with a plastic bucket from the nearby public trash-cans and sorts it into his cart. The rest of the time he sits on doorsteps, reading the paper or talking. A few workers from the Italian restaurants will bring him bottles, all stopping to discuss the weather or the news. He has great "people skills," a low-key charm and an ability to connect with a great variety of people. "Yeah, I've always been sociable," he explained. "I used to work the audience real good. It was a pity I wasn't a great singer." Most days Desmond sets off with his heavy load in the early evening, toward a recycling company three miles across town. This is one of the few places where he can sell his wine bottles. With the money he can usually afford two hamburgers, a five dollar hit of crack, and some bourbon to get him through the night. Compared to many homeless men, Desmond's crack habit is quite well controlled. He gets the crack and bourbon in the Tenderloin on his way back to North Beach.

Desmond's friend Julio, a Salvadoran bus boy at one of the upscale Italian restaurants, arrives every couple of days with a load of empty wine bottles and a spliff of marijuana to share in the alley. Sometimes he brings leftovers. When they first became friends, Julio was convinced he could eventually get Desmond a job as a dishwasher. "Have to keep trying, amigo. You'll do good, I know." Desmond would play along, "Maybe, we'll see," but told me privately that Julio was a great guy but he did not understand America yet.

Not black America anyway. I'm not saying it's impossible for blacks to get ahead, because I see plenty of them every day up here. Even those traveling college kids with the sucker bags [back packs], some of those are black kids now. But for us it's always been one strike you're out. Me, I'm out, literally. [Desmond laughs.]

A couple of months after this conversation, Julio got Desmond an interview with his manager. Desmond was ambivalent about going, but eventually came to my place to spruce up, saying he did not want to hurt Julio's feelings. By the time he had to leave, he seemed optimistic, cracking jokes about those free meals he would serve us when he was promoted to waiter.

Apparently the manager spent only about one minute talking to Desmond and said he thought he already had someone for the job. Julio and Desmond came away with different stories. Julio seemed frustrated that Desmond acted too unenthusiastic, telling him, "You got to look like you want that job." Desmond was softly unyielding:

Look, hombre, I knew he wasn't interested. He took one look at my face and knew I was on hard times. I doubt they ever hire blacks in those joints any more, even if I wasn't a bum and a felon. . . . But my mouth doesn't help. If I was really serious about employment, I need to get me Medicaid and see about some dentures.

Like all the recyclers, Desmond feels that the nature of "society" has changed, not just his own circumstances:

I'm sure of it, people in general, across the board, now they more out for themselves. Proud to be selfish. You hear it all over, like "I'm getting me mine" and all that bullshit. . . . I'm all for self-help you know, but, hell, we need some unity, people.

Another ex-con recycler, a white man called George, feels much the same way:

I went to prison in '81. When I got out in '88, I found the change. Nothing changes in prison, but when you come out, you know, into society, things are always changing. When I came out, I found so many "snakish" people, people who didn't give a care about nothing.

I asked George if the change was not more that now he was associating with poorer people, unemployed or homeless. After all, he was in a very different position in those days, as a delivery driver with an apartment and a girl friend.

It's true, no one gives a homeless guy the benefit of the doubt. But back then you wouldn't let a guy go homeless. Not unless he was truly fried [drug damaged]. It didn't seem so much of a problem. There was work, you know, so you wouldn't get stuck. . . .

Desmond also complains of the difficulty of creating community on the street, given the mutual fear and hostility among too many street people. He talks of street life as a young man's world, requiring the energy and apparent invincibility of brutal youth:

Oh, I dunno. Sometimes I think I'm just too old now. I never was real hard, and now, now I *sure* can't deal with the kind of bullshit going down out here. I mean, I sound like an old-timer: "things ain't how they used to be." Can't crest the wave so I got sand in the mouth. Shit.

Later that night Desmond ran over a variety of jobs he thought he could do successfully. "I don't ask for much right now," he said, leaning his forehead against an alley wall. "Just give me a minimum-wage job and the appearance of basic respect and I'll *be* that old-timer."

#### INTO THE DUSTBIN OF HISTORY?

Despite their differences, Sam, Clarence, and Desmond share a common past in which they earned decent money and were generally treated respectfully. As a musician, Desmond was never in the solid financial position of Sam and Clarence in their good days, but he moved in similar circles and never doubted that a solid job would be his for the asking. Desmond

remarked that "In the old days, you know, it felt like something to be American, even for us" [black Americans]. "I used to know a couple of dudes from India. . . . We'd talk about how you'd never get that kind of extreme shit over here. Not since slavery. But now. . . ." Desmond pointed to a wheelchair-bound homeless man trying unsuccessfully to relieve himself discreetly. "Now we've got *that*."

Clarence, Sam, and Desmond may not have considered themselves fortunate at the time, but in retrospect their old days are bathed in a golden glow. They experience the new order as a set of forces against them, which they cannot harness to their advantage. However, the reason the recyclers see deindustrialization, military downsizing, and the War on Drugs as antagonistic forces is not because they are inherently external, but because these forces are part of a social order in which they have no part. Flexible nineties America doesn't harness *their* interests, or articulate their experience. The era of Keynesianism and the Pax Americana was equally "big," but there they felt part of the bigness. Indeed, as soldiers, unionized workers, and consumers of goods subsidized by American market control, they *were* part of it. Even Desmond made his living catering to a prosperous black working-class audience, now either scattered outside the historical black communities or suffering in their decay. The swinging club strips fed by the postwar black prosperity have diminished or disappeared.

This new order introduced by the Reagan administration, like its Keynesian predecessor, is not only global but profoundly local. It presents itself to individuals in the form of both overwhelming constraints and novel opportunities. Here in San Francisco the winners and losers are painfully thrust together. The disproportionately black and Latino working class, the elderly, and the poor of the city are progressively displaced into Oakland and smaller depressed suburbs by all the young people from suburban backgrounds pouring in to take advantage of the flexibility, good pay, interesting work, and pseudo-Bohemian lifestyles offered by the computer industry in the Silicon Valley and San Francisco's Multimedia Gulch. San Francisco has lost over half of its African American population since 1970. As for the homeless, the software takeoff has nothing to offer them beyond a glut of mineral-water empties. Emaciated panhandlers with hunted eyes creep into the less well lit restaurants and bars, trying to hustle a buck before expulsion.

The pros feel left behind—Sam explicitly calls himself a "relic." But in their homeless state, the pros are in their own way integral manifestations of resurgent conservatism in the United States. Mass homelessness is the most visible and, to many, the most disturbing result of the end of the Keynesian tax-and-spend model. The recyclers are therefore not exactly *typical* but are *emblematic* in their fall from working-class respectability into indigent marginality.

The recyclers are also emblematic in that the poor—most specifically "welfare mothers," ghetto dwellers, the homeless, or destitute addicts—are the most common targets of the compulsion to *adapt* that is the Zeitgeist of the last fifteen years.

Newt Gingrich, coordinator of the Republican 1996 "Contract with America," said that "we simply must abandon the welfare state and move to an opportunity society."<sup>25</sup> Most Democrats concur, intoning that removing government support from the disadvantaged is the truly compassionate choice, the only way to save them from isolation and degradation. In the second presidential debate of the 1996 campaign, Bill Clinton claimed:

I started working on welfare reform . . . because I was sick of seeing people trapped in a system that was increasingly physically isolating them and making their kids more vulnerable to getting in trouble.<sup>26</sup>

Both parties would have us believe that the solution to endemic poverty is good honest work, yet the conditions of available jobs for unskilled workers are unlikely to pull a person, let alone a family, out of poverty. Workfare workers are not covered by federal wage legislation. Indeed, under the terms of the Personal Responsibility Act they do not have to be paid anything over their basic welfare benefit level. The entry of both high numbers of workfare workers and workers previously on welfare is likely to depress wages considerably in low-wage labor markets, where workers already struggle to pay for housing, medical treatment, and childcare.<sup>27</sup>

Protecting the wages and working conditions of citizens is no longer a realistic approach in a globalized world, explains Robert Reich, the center-left secretary of labor during Clinton's first term. Contemporary government should resign itself to the reality that multinational corporations can set the basic terms of the work environment. Government should concentrate on leading the population into the most favorable niches in the international economy. In their turn, the American public should concentrate on skill acquisition so that as many of them as possible can become symbolic analysts, the only workers who can expect decent pay and working conditions.<sup>28</sup>

Even before they became homeless, there was little chance of middle-aged, relatively uneducated men like the pros moving into the areas of job growth. Too young for retirement, too old for radically new directions, most of the recyclers have neither the education for high tech jobs nor the capacity for "emotion work" necessary for most service jobs.<sup>29</sup> These kinds of life histories tend to produce men who are both uncomfortable and inexperienced at using their "personality" for direct economic gain. Besides, even minimum-wage employers are likely to dismiss such job applicants as potentially overly assertive and unlikely to learn new work practices. And they might well be right. After all, what the recyclers took for granted about

their old work, and what they recreate in recycling, is the minimum level of "emotion work," hustle, and "sucking up." Such jobs are now hard to find.

#### HOMELESSNESS: SYMPTOM OR DISEASE?

So what about the experts, the researchers in academia, social welfare institutions, and policy think tanks? Rather than exploring the relationship between homelessness and neoliberal America, most have adopted a disease model which focuses on the grubby, addicted, and depressed poor themselves. Where hardline conservatives see intentional homelessness and criminality, the disease model places the homeless under a fine microscope, separating them into various categories of disability. Mental illness, addiction, and family dysfunction are each measured in order to build a composite model of the problem.

The disease model did not always dominate the debate on homelessness. A structural model that focused on war and economy had its currency in the early 1980s when the Reagan revolution took an ax to the remaining Great Society programs and a century of labor rights. Many New Left activists eagerly responded by taking up the cause of homelessness, as a case in which the poverty and desperation of the victims were indisputable. Here, perhaps, corporate downsizing, union busting, and Reaganomics could be shown to be inhumane, just as the homeless "Hoovervilles" had served the reform discourse of the depression era.<sup>30</sup> No doubt the popular perception of homeless people as relatively racially diverse, compared to the ghetto poor, helped this construction of deservingness. Similarly, the prior military service of many homeless men continues to be an important source of sympathy and funds.

And so for a time during the eighties the activists were considerably successful with their structural analysis. Liberal mass media often presented the homeless as ordinary people down on their luck, especially emphasizing homeless two-parent families, which are in fact relatively rare.<sup>31</sup> The homeless Vietnam veteran, alternately wounded everyman and modern-day gunslinger, became a stock figure, played in Hollywood by Sylvester Stallone, Liam Neeson, and Jean-Claude Van Damme.<sup>32</sup>

Both conservatives and health professionals eventually developed critiques of this "ideological" hyperbole, agreeing that the activists grossly overestimated the numbers of homeless, and that their conception of a large working-class pool "at risk" of homelessness relied on ridiculous claims of similarity between the homeless and the general public. The National Coalition for the Homeless and various city-level advocacy groups and organizations of the homeless continue to articulate a structural interpretation, but the disease model counter-interpretation now dominates the press, the Democratic party establishment, and the more liberal state and local governments.

From the point of view of most health professionals in the field, homelessness is a symptom of the severe mental illness and substance abuse of the few, and has little to do with working and housing conditions for the many.<sup>33</sup> This individualization of the causes of homelessness restricts legitimate research to examinations of the individual characteristics that prevent homeless people from fitting in and to studies of the best ways to help them move back into society. The nature of the society they are expected to fit in to is rarely subject to debate. While the "homelessness industry" provides essential practical services to the homeless, its resistance to structural interpretations and solutions echoes the "sobriety plus hard work" prescription of the urban missions of the early twentieth century. Like those of the free market conservatives, such interpretations naturalize the relatively recent social and economic structure of the United States in the nineties into a given—"jobs and housing"—forgetting the administered, sometimes negotiated terrain that was the norm for fifty years after the New Deal.

The better shelters, drug rehabilitation centers, and even prisons do reach out to help those who have hit rock-bottom, provided they are willing to acknowledge their sickness and take the approved steps out of it.<sup>34</sup> Those diagnosed with depression and other mental disorders must promise to stay on their drugs, while those diagnosed as addicts must strive to stay off theirs. Yet at the same time, low wages, harsh sentencing policies, and cuts in welfare and disability entitlements keep pressing down on the poorer members of the working class, steadily increasing the number of the near-homeless and despairing. The homelessness industry can do little about the constant supply of clients, only try its best to turn a few of them around with little more than "self-esteem," Prozac, or the fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous to help them.

The proponents of the disease model are right in noting that the structural perspective of homeless activists and advocates tends to underplay addictions and mental instability among the homeless. Most clearly, there is no doubt that the isolation and extreme poverty of a sizable minority of the homeless that suffer from organic mental illness has much more to do with misguided policy and changes in family structure than with changes in the labor market. However, the disease model sets up a false antagonism between "proximal" causes, such as depression or substance abuse, and structural conditions beyond the individual's control—the shrinking market for manual laborers, for example. This line of thought tends to obscure the complex relationship between the personal and the structural. For men like Sam, there is rarely a simple one-way relationship between drinking, getting laid off, marital breakdown, and homelessness. Or, again, between a long prison sentence, drugs, and depression, in the case of Desmond. Similarly, the same self-destructive or unstable behavior carries very different outcomes, depending on a person's degree of family support and his or

her position in society. If Clarence had had a close, loving family to return to, technical or educational qualifications, or even just friends with civilian employment know-how, it is unlikely that his discharge from the military would have left him so fundamentally alone.

Drug and alcohol use and abuse, after all, are endemic to society, both in urban and rural areas. Yet most people with addictions continue to function in their work lives. Cocaine, in particular, is favored by workers in high-stress jobs—high-end restaurant workers and lawyers, as well as the overtime hounds of the working class. One of the other recyclers developed his habit while working as a house painter. "The money was no good, so they paid us a bonus in cocaine. I'd never done it before. It used to be expensive. But on that painting crew there was a fair amount of peer pressure. You know, if you're not one of the boys, you won't get called next time. Some jobs it's beer, some jobs it's coke, or crack. You work better on coke, of course."

The connection among drug use, hard labor, and impoverished men goes way back. Like the Bolivian miners chewing their coca leaves, the tramps and hoboes who built America used alcohol heavily to numb their regrets and and reward their back-breaking labor. Nels Anderson tells how the "hoboes" served an intermediate role in developing the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They arrived too late for the great land grabs, but served a vital "in-between" role as cheap, flexible labor power for the extractive industries that fueled the American juggernaut. The hobo labor market centered on the railway hub of Chicago; half a million transients passed through that city every year. Too poor to marry, too proud to do service jobs, the hard-drinking, rebellious hoboes became a class of their own, often ending up dependent on the urban missions when economic slumps, old age, or industrial injury cut them down.<sup>35</sup>

It was not their hard drinking that destroyed the hobo class. Just as the steel mills, auto plants, and other heavy industries of the postwar period closed their doors on the industrial worker of the 1970s and 80s, the industrial frontier gradually lost its use for the hobo. Mechanization, corporate consolidation, and family settlement of the West lowered the demand for large numbers of migrant workers to build railroads, work temporary mining camps, harvest ice, and move crops. In this later phase, in the 1920s and 30s, the underemployed hobo became a burden on the cities, as more and more former transients turned into "home guards"—low-paid petty workers, panhandlers, and con artists.

Like the homeless in the 1980s, the "transients" of the 1920s became a much-discussed social problem. Charitable municipal communities were instituted, and the hobo became an early subject of the new discipline of psychopathology. Specialists generally presented the problem in individual terms. Even though it was the demand of the frontier for a tough, flexible, bachelor workforce that had created skid row, its culture, and characteristic

institutions, the psychopathologists and social workers assessed the "hobo problem" purely in terms of the personality defects of the homeless man, his immature "wanderlust," "egocentricity," "emotional instability," and, above all, his drinking.

Anderson, who was a former hobo and the child of a transient worker, tended to a more holistic analysis:

All the problems of the homeless man go back in one way or another to the conditions of his work. The irregularity of his employment is reflected in the irregularity of all phases of his existence. To deal with him even as an individual, society must deal also with the economic forces which have formed his behavior, with the seasonal and cyclical fluctuations in industry. This means that the problem of the homeless man is not local but national.<sup>36</sup>

For Anderson, the primary solution to the hobo problem would be the "decasualization of labor," to be achieved by instituting a well-funded national employment system with the job of regulating employment agencies, providing public works for periods of business depression, and regulating unemployment insurance in vulnerable industries.<sup>37</sup>

And indeed this is what came to be in the New Deal era. First, the great depression pulled so many of the population into skid row that the structural interpretation of vagrancy gained unprecedented strength. The Roosevelt administration set up the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps work programs, and the new Social Security entitlements rescued the elderly from skid row. In the wartime and postwar boom, the skid rows of America shrank to a fraction of their old glory, the radical tramps of the IWW died out, and the majority of the white working class found the means for marriage and stability in the new tax-and-spend commonwealth.

Now the shape of the society has changed again, and the 1990s are not so very different from the 1920s. It is an age of hype and glitter, and there are new fortunes to be made, but at the same time large numbers of workers have been displaced, and are roaming the country for work. This time, the labor surplus is less about the closing of the second frontier and the mechanization of farming, and more about globalization and the collapse of heavy industry and union labor. As then, free-market politics are in ascendancy and imprisonment rates are high. And, once again, hundreds of thousands of single indigent men and women crowd the skid row areas of the major cities, panhandling, working by the day, selling papers, selling sex, and operating various minor scams. This time they are younger, and more of them are black or brown-skinned. The poorest of them are homeless.

Like Anderson's hoboes, today's homeless men are a hard-drinking, hard-drugging crew, with a disproportionate number of free-thinkers, ex-convicts, orphans, and other misfits.<sup>38</sup> If they have enough money they may



stay in one of the few remaining single-occupancy hotels. The cage hotels and flophouses that enabled their forerunners to sleep inside for a minimal fee have disappeared. Now they can either sleep in shelters similar to the old missions or lie outside in the streets or under bridges, in doorways, or over steam vents. Like the mission strivers of the twenties, a disproportionate number of the homeless and near-homeless are sick or disabled. Around 30 percent are said to show signs of serious mental illness.<sup>39</sup> A significant modern development is that illness has become much more lucrative than it was in the past. Now, a crippling hit-and-run injury or the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness is surprisingly often assessed as "worth it" by a man exhausted from years on the street. Now he will qualify for disability payments and can finally move inside, into his own place. Disability becomes a solution as well as a cause of homelessness for some individuals.

Today, however, the problem of homelessness is even more international than it was in the Great Depression. In all the richest countries of the world, large numbers of men of working age are sleeping rough. In Japan, for example, homelessness has become a major issue since the recent economic crisis. In urban underpasses armies of men sleep in cardboard boxes, their shoes neatly positioned beside them. France, Russia, Britain, Italy—all the European countries have their own manifestations of the problem.

Like the psychopathologists of the twenties, most policy experts on the subject of homelessness and indeed poverty in general, agree that the growth of homelessness in the eighties and nineties has little to do with labor or housing markets but is generated by diseases of the mind, dysfunctional families, and demon drugs. Like the reformers of the past, some favor outreach and treatment, others prohibition and imprisonment.

The radical homelessness advocates see the homeless as canaries in the mine, the vulnerable or unlucky few who are the first to succumb to the dangerous gases around all of us. And many poor and working-class people agree that they are "one paycheck away from homelessness." Lillian Rubin says that "Nothing [better] exemplifies the change in the twenty years since I last studied working-class families than the fear of being 'on the street.'"<sup>40</sup>

Yet at the same time, policy experts, politicians, and other opinion leaders continue to medicalize homelessness, telling us that the canaries are suffering from a specific disease of their own. All we can do is help the best of them back into the mine, where work shall set them free. With such lordly discourses we render natural and inevitable the grand social upheavals of our times: the sweeping destruction of blue-collar living standards, the mass incarceration of black men, and the wholesale abandonment of the poor.

#### NOTES

In the academic field I received wonderful encouragement and guidance from Leslie Salzinger and Amy Schalet. Back home, my band—Andrew, Josh, Gina, and

James—and my chosen family—Tricia, John-boy, Kev, and Mark—all did their best to keep my feet on the ground and my heart full of music during a difficult period of my life. My biggest thank-you goes to all the recyclers who helped me with this research, especially Sam, Clarence, and Desmond, all fictitious names. I dedicate the chapter to those who didn't make it. Rest in peace, brothers.

1. *Details*, January 1997, p. 53.
2. Both *Details'* flexible man and the street hustler model are primarily masculine visions, *Details'* because such levels of disaffiliation are neither appealing nor realistic for most women, the hustler model because poor women with children have been differently positioned vis-à-vis law, benefit entitlement, and the state. They have greater access to money and shelter because of their roles as mothers and victims of domestic violence, while poor unemployed men receive little to no financial support and are overwhelmingly caught up in the criminal justice system. One work which explores the differentiation and separation of the poor by gender is Joanne Passaro's *The Unequal Homeless: Men on the Streets, Women in Their Place*. The new time limits on AFDC are likely to transform the gender differentials. Already sharply rising rates of women's imprisonment suggests that the decline of welfare benefits to poor women will be reflected in increasing criminal activity.
3. David A. Snow et al., "The Homeless as Bricoleurs: Material Survival Strategies on the Streets," p. 6.
4. Sabra Chartrand, "Unions Try to Secure a Place in the Changing Work World."
5. *Street Sheet*, June 1997, p. 6.
6. See Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, chapter 4 ("Fortress LA"), pp. 221–64.
7. Talmadge Wright, *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities and Contested Landscapes*; and Erich Brosh, "No Place Like Home," *Harper's*, April 1998, pp. 58–59.
8. In April 1996 a judge marked the official termination of the Matrix program under the new administration of Mayor Willie Brown by dismissing nearly 40,000 citations and warrants, most of them issued for drinking in public. However, since Brown was elected the Matrix citations have actually increased in some categories, especially for sleeping in parks. According to the figures kept by the Coalition on Homelessness, the 4,692 citations given in the first four months of the Brown administration exceeded the 4,360 citations issued to homeless people in the first four months of 1995, at the height of the official Matrix program (*San Francisco Bay Guardian*, April 17, 1996). The primary difference between the administrations is that the populist Brown does not promote the public image of himself as scourge of the homeless.
9. Kathleen Stewart, "Nostalgia as Polemic," p. 252.
10. Stewart's elitist nostalgia of power, exhilaration, and flux perhaps underplays the discomfort, even desperation, that can tinge elite romanticizing about the primitive, the authentic, the working-class, the black, and so on. I prefer Renato Rosaldo's "imperialist nostalgia," which describes white frontiersmen and imperialists concealing feelings of doubt and guilt by mourning the passing of what they themselves have transformed as if such passing were inevitable. Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, chapter 3.
11. Stewart, p. 253.
12. "The Downsizing of America," *The New York Times*, March 3, 1996.



13. These are terms used, respectively, by Castells (1989), Lash and Urry (1987), Harvey (1989), and Jameson (1991).
14. Dick Walker, "California Rages Against the Dying of the Light." California received up to 23 percent of all United States defense contracts in the Reagan years.
15. Ibid., p. 45.
16. By subcontracting into the informal economy, enterprises can avoid the "indirect wage" of benefits and at the same time increase labor control by restoring arbitrary dismissal. Work becomes a joint attempt by worker and manager to avoid legal detection, making it almost impossible for workers to use any outside leverage in their relationships with management. In the context of rising competition from the global economy, American informalization is increasingly ignored by state regulatory agencies, as it provides much-needed jobs. For politicians committed to curbing the political power of labor, informalization helps to suppress the mobilization of workers through formal democratic channels or unions.
17. Kevin Heldman, "On the Town with the U.S. Military," p. 24.
18. *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1988.
19. Roediger's study of the evolution of white working-class identity shows how white republican independence was historically counterposed to the unfree slaves. In an early version of blaming the victim, African Americans were held to be inherently incapable of these same republican virtues and therefore the enemy of righteous free labor. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, chapter 3.
20. Troy Duster, "Pattern, Purpose, and Race in the Drug War: The Crisis of Credibility in Criminal Justice," p. 266.
21. United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, excerpted by *Prison Legal News* on the World Wide Web at [http://www.ai.mit.edu/people/ellens/PLN/4.3/FEDERAL\\_PRISON.html](http://www.ai.mit.edu/people/ellens/PLN/4.3/FEDERAL_PRISON.html).
- The prison system has taken up some of the slack from job losses in industry and the military by multiplying prison-related jobs by four since 1980. Most prisoners are also workers, though hardly employees, given that they are usually paid under fifty cents an hour. Prison production from the federal Unicorp program alone is worth \$1.35 billion per year, creating ultra-low-wage workers on the inside out of those who might refuse such work on the outside (*San Francisco Bay Guardian*, July 17, 1996). It is unlikely, however, that the high costs of maintaining a prison population—now approaching \$30 billion a year, at least five times greater than in most industrialized nations—can be rendered cost-effective by such measures.
22. William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, pp. 40–41. Drug offenders accounted for more than a third (36 percent) of the national increase in the state prison population from 1985 to 1994 and more than two-thirds (71 percent) of the increase in the federal prison population for this period (Marc Mauer, *Intended and Unintended Consequences: State Racial Disparities in Imprisonment*).
23. Mauer.
24. Katherine Beckett, *Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics*, pp. 44–48.
25. Newt Gingrich, *To Renew America*, p. 9.
26. The increased discussion of minority "isolation" in newspaper columns and

political speeches of the nineties reflects the broad influence of William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* in policy circles.

27. Adolph Reed, Jr., "A Slave to Finance," p. 27.
28. Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations*. Reich implies that union mobilization in the low-wage, routine production and service sectors is no longer a viable strategy, as capital will only move elsewhere. In keeping with his argument that corporations are increasingly supranational, Reich does not approve of preferential government support for United States-owned businesses, as they are no more likely to provide decent jobs than any foreign corporation.
29. For discussion of "emotion work," see Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*.
30. An academic structural analysis of contemporary homelessness is provided by Joel Blau in *The Visible Poor*. Blau retains a consistent focus on the pathologies of the wider society rather than on those of the homeless themselves, moving from large-scale phenomena such as unemployment, underemployment, and welfare contraction to more specific structural changes such as rent inflation and the destruction of America's skid row hotels.
31. Two-parent families do not figure highly in statistics of the homeless. Apart from the huge stresses that poverty and insecurity put on relationships, institutions such as AFDC, safe houses, and family shelters have made it economically possible, and often desirable, for poor women to leave their partners.
32. The prototype for the homeless Vietnam veteran as the contemporary rendition of the Western movie's man-without-a-name is the first "Rambo" movie, *First Blood* (1982), directed by Ted Kotcheff and starring Sylvester Stallone (Ronald Reagan's favorite movie). Rambo first comes into conflict with the hick cop badguys of the movie when they arrest him for vagrancy. Neeson starred in *Suspect* (1987), directed by Peter Yates, Van Damme in *Hard Target* (1993), directed by John Woo.
33. See, for example, Alice S. Baum and Donald W. Burnes, *A Nation in Denial: The Truth about Homelessness*, p. 125; Stephen F. Redburn and Terry F. Buss, *Responding to America's Homeless: Public Policy Alternatives*; and Dennis P. Culhane, June M. Avery, and Trevor R. Hadley, "Prevalence of Treated Behavioral Disorders among Adult Shelter Users: A Longitudinal Study."
34. Most drug rehabilitation programs piggyback onto the nonprofessional twelve-step movement, which offers strong peer support and frequent activities for the recovering addict.
35. Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*.
36. Ibid., p. 121.
37. Ibid., p. 268.
38. Both Nels Anderson, in 1923, and Snow, Anderson, and Koegel, in 1994, remark on the high numbers of orphans and foster children in their samples.
39. Interview with Peter Rossi, a longtime student of the vast homelessness literature. See Benedict Giamo and Jeffrey Grunberg, *Beyond Homelessness: Frames of Reference*, chapter 1.
40. Lillian B. Rubin, *Families on the Fault Line*, p. 114.